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Quite an experience

van Hulst, M.J.

Published in:
Critical Policy Analysis

Publication date:
2008

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in Tilburg University Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
van Hulst, M. J. (2008). Quite an experience: Using ethnography to study local governance. *Critical Policy Analysis*, 2(2), 143-159.

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Critical Policy Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t907385190>

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Online publication date: 11 March 2010

To cite this Article van Hulst, Merlijn J.(2008) 'Quite an experience: Using ethnography to study local governance', Critical Policy Studies, 2: 2, 143 — 159

To link to this Article DOI: 10.1080/19460171.2008.9518535

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2008.9518535>

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Quite an Experience: Using Ethnography to Study Local Governance

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Abstract

Ethnographic fieldwork brings something special to the study of sense-making in local governance: the ethnographer's access to the experiences lived by the people under study. In addition, ethnographers not only look for the experiences of the people in and around local government, they also draw on their own experiences. Because the experiences of politicians, administrators, bureaucrats, professionals and citizens are both the result of and the basis for their acts, understanding these experiences helps ethnographers to explain the practice of local governance. This paper sketches the background of interpretive ethnography, gives an idea of the use of ethnographic fieldwork in recent research, and explains the idea behind fieldwork. It also discusses the elements of fieldwork. In particular, the paper looks at the usefulness of ethnographic fieldwork for the study of local governance.

This paper was first presented at the 'Ethnographic Methods in Local Policy Research Workshop', held 13 March 2008 at Manchester University (UK). I want to thank Francesca Gains, Michael Mair and Patrick Watson for their invitation to the workshop. I also want to thank two anonymous reviewers for their comments and Dvora Yanow for her constant encouragement and for her detailed comments on a previous version of this paper.

This paper discusses ethnography and, in particular, the usefulness of ethnography for the study of sense-making in local governance. By 'ethnography' I mean 'ethnographic fieldwork'. If focused on sense-making, ethnography can also be referred to as 'interpretive ethnography'. The ethnographic study of sense-making, then, should be seen as a member of the species often called 'interpretive methods' (Yanow 2000; Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006b).¹

Interpretive ethnography, in particular, brings something special to the study of local governance: access to the experiences lived by the people under study. Ethnographers not only look at the experiences of the people in and around local government, they also draw on their own experiences. Because the experiences of politicians, administrators, bureaucrats, professionals and citizens are both the result of and the basis for their acts, understanding these experiences helps ethnographers to explain the practice of local governance.

A portion of this paper is based on my own experiences doing the fieldwork (Van Hulst 2008a; 2008b). For that study I did ethnographic fieldwork in two municipalities.² This paper begins with the background of interpretive ethnography and briefly explains the use of ethnographic fieldwork in recent research. The following sections discuss the idea behind fieldwork, fieldwork acts and fieldworker skills/qualities, and the usefulness of ethnographic fieldwork for the study of local governance.³

The Use of Ethnography

Although the concept of ethnography is often used to refer to the written result of fieldwork (Van Maanen 1988), ethnographic fieldwork refers to a way of gathering, or what social constructivists prefer to call 'generating', data (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006a: 115). Others have referred to more or less the same activity using the concepts 'observation', 'participant observation', 'field research' or 'fieldwork' (Schatzman and Strauss 1973; Gans 1976; Spradley 1980; Fenno 1986).⁴ Ethnographic fieldwork has been in use for a long time in anthropology, the study of the culture of a people, and has been used in sociology for a long time as well (Van Maanen 1988: 19-21). Ethnographic fieldwork in an interpretive fashion became well-known throughout the social sciences through the work of Clifford Geertz (1993[1973]: especially Chapter 1). For Geertz, ethnographic fieldwork meant investigating the systems of meaning that people in the field employed. Ethnography, he said, should not be a science in search of (general) laws, but one in search of (particular) meanings. Later on he phrased it as trying to figure out 'what the devil they [people in the field] think they are up to' (Geertz 2000[1983]: 58).

Many social scientists studying modern societies follow in Geertz's footsteps. Ethnography in an interpretive mode has, for instance, been used frequently in organizational science. Gideon Kunda (1992), for example, did ethnographic research to find out how culture was used as a tool for normative control in a high-tech corporation in the United States. Julian Orr (1990; 1996) studied Xerox service technicians who were trying to deal with photocopy machines and the clients operating them.

Political scientists have also used ethnographic fieldwork in the sense that Geertz meant it. Richard Fenno (1986), for instance, followed North American politicians around and talked

to them as they went about their work.⁵ In public administration, Paul Frissen (1989) studied the cultural impact of information technology on the directorate-general of a Dutch ministry. On the border between organizational science and policy analysis, Dvora Yanow (1996) was an observer and participant in an Israeli community center.

Recently, new advocates of ethnography – and interpretive research as such – have appeared in the context of studying British governance and political and administrative elites (Rhodes 2002; Bevir and Rhodes 2003; Rhodes, et al. 2007). But while the study of political culture has been a part of political science for a long time (Almond and Verba 1963; Johnson 2003), it hardly involved ethnographic fieldwork. And, even though researchers like Herbert Kaufman (1960) and Peter Blau (1963[1955]) were already using ethnographic methods, the idea of using political ethnography has been marginal in political science (Bayard de Volo and Schatz 2004).

At the same time, there are researchers with other disciplinary backgrounds, such as those trained in anthropology and sociology, who are writing political ethnography (Baiocchi and Conner 2008; Shore and Wright 1997). In most of these instances, it is not necessarily something holistic like 'the culture' of an organization or political entity that the fieldworkers are studying. Being aware of the conflicted and even ambiguous nature of culture,⁶ these interpretive researchers study sense-making practices or processes (Wright 1994; Wedeen 2002; Van Hulst 2008a). Their meanings often prove to be contested and under construction, rather than shared and fixed.

The Idea behind Fieldwork

Doing interpretive, ethnographic fieldwork is about 'being there' in order to understand what sense people under study are making of what is happening to them.⁷ 'Being there' is normally taken to mean being physically present in the field (see also Rhodes, et al. 2007: 3-4). However, it is never totally clear what 'the field' is. It might be one or more physical locations. But it might also be conceptual or virtual (e.g., ethnography of the internet). In addition, the boundaries of the field are always under construction. In my research on municipalities, I used the formal institution of the local government as a basis, and followed the action on various political issues. Nevertheless, this did not make things easy, since the particular, local construction of the idea of local government and of governing was part of my interest. The choice of the definition of 'the field', then, is partly up to the researcher, while the construction of the field can be an important focus of the research. That does not, however, change a basic requirement of ethnographic fieldwork: in order to come to some sort of understanding of the way people make sense, a researcher needs to spend a fair amount of time with the people in the field.⁸

So, the focus on actors' accounts of their world brings the researcher close to practice, close to 'his data' (Fenno 1986: 3). It involves looking for data that are in one way or another 'raw' in the sense of close to the people's original sense-making.⁹ In their classic book on field research, published in the same year as Geertz's statement on interpretive ethnography, Schatzman and Strauss made a case for this effort when they said that...

[t]he researcher must get close to the people whom he studies; he understands that their actions are best comprehended when observed on the spot – in the natural, ongoing environment where they live and work. If man creates at least some of the conditions for his own actions, then it can be presumed that he acts in his own world, at the very place and time that he is. The researcher himself must be at the location, not only to watch but also to listen to the symbolic sounds that characterize this world. A dialogue with persons in their natural situation will reveal the nuances of meaning from which their perspectives and definitions are continually forged (Schatzman and Strauss 1973: 5-6).

The effort to get close to practice does not have to imply a naïve naturalism that claims to come into contact with the 'real' meanings people give their world. It does not necessarily mean embracing the idea that there is one genuine reality of the 'native' that can be accessed directly (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995[1983]: 10-11). The worldview of the people in the field, even if it is shared, stable and consistent, can only be reconstructed.¹⁰ But, what fieldwork *does* enable ethnographers to do is to find out about the variety of ways in which people experience reality, and they can do this partly through their own experiences of what happens in the field. In the end, the idea behind ethnographic fieldwork in an interpretive mode is that fieldworkers immerse themselves in others' worlds, which involves 'both being with other people to see how they respond to events as they happen and experiencing for oneself these events and the circumstances that gave rise to them' (Emerson, et al. 1995: 2).

Activities and Skills in the Field

When it comes to doing fieldwork in local governance, five fieldwork activities play an important role.¹¹ First of all, the fieldworkers need to gain and maintain access to the field (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006a).¹² Since the field does not necessarily have a clear shape or boundary, there is not always a need for formal access or a specific point of entry. Being present at meetings in the local bureaucracy, for instance, is typically something for which one has to gain access, while meetings of residents or political meetings are often open to the public. In addition, there is not one single 'gatekeeper'. There might be none or there might be many. Gaining access, when needed, does not mean that access will be given to everything that is happening and that it is guaranteed over a long period of time. Access may have to be negotiated during the entire fieldwork period. Because the issue of access is anything but straightforward, one could as well talk more generally about establishing and maintaining relations with people or organizations in the field. Fieldworkers can gain and maintain access through the usual ways one approaches others (letters, e-mail, etc.), although one has to keep in mind that how and through whom one enters the field may influence the fieldwork later on. In my fieldwork, for instance, members of an opposition political party were suspicious of me because I was introduced to them by the alderman who had replaced *their* alderman on the Board after a recent administrative crisis.

Secondly, ethnographers go into the field to observe, with whatever degree of participation (Spradley 1980: 58-62; Gans 1976: 51-52). This is the hallmark of ethnographic fieldwork. Ethnographers can observe what people do, instead of being limited to what people *say* about what they do (Gans 1999: 540). Ethnographers can observe people or spaces. They can observe or participate in meetings, rallies, presentations, celebrations, debates and other events. In my fieldwork, I followed the course of four processes: an urban restructuring project; an administrative crisis; the planning of a town center; and a debate on the core tasks of a local government. Fieldwork can also consist of following particular people around, a particular method usually referred to as 'shadowing' (Czarniawska 2007: 20-58).¹³

Thirdly, ethnographers talk to people in the field in official, semi-structured or open interviews, and/or in the form of more casual conversations (for a list of possible people to talk to, see Table 1, below). This talk allows ethnographers to ask about the things that puzzle them and to look behind the façade of everyday appearances for the hidden and marginalized tales of the field. Interviewing and more informal modes of talking give people who are caught up in their world a moment to tell an outsider what is going on and, depending on the style of interviewing or conversing, to reflect on it. One might even say that, for a moment, the interviewee steps out of his flow of experience and into the research process. And, although interviews and other forms of conversation are themselves social situations that produce their own experiences, fieldworkers ideally experience more of the world they are interested in after talking to people who can tell them about their daily lives in the field.

Fourthly, ethnographers gather – which most of the time means making copies, print-outs or photographs of – all sorts of artefacts in the field, whether they are the formal documents of the institutions that they study or posters that citizens hand out during a protest in a neighborhood (for a more complete list, see Table 1, below). These artefacts contain and reflect all sorts of experiences the people in the field have and are often meant to trigger certain experiences on the part of those who encounter them. Reading or looking at these *objects trouvés* as an ethnographer in the field or back at the office will, like conducting an interview, enrich the experience ethnographers have as part of the fieldwork.

The last activity that is part of the fieldwork is making field notes (Emerson, et al. 1995; Spradley 1980: 63-72). In making field notes, ethnographers try to form ideas about what is going on in the field that is of importance to solving the puzzle that brought them there in the first place. Ethnographers make an effort to turn the flow of experiences into descriptions of the actors, settings, events and practices. Ethnographers reconstruct the field on paper. This reconstruction in field notes needs to be supplemented with analytical notes (e.g., inferences, theoretical ideas) that arise from the fieldwork experience.¹⁴ Finally, descriptions of the fieldwork process, methodological choices made and problems dealt with in the field should find their way into a fieldwork journal.

Since fieldworkers are the 'instrument' of the research (Adler and Adler 1987: 32), the five activities of fieldwork go hand in hand with certain skills or qualities that fieldworkers need to possess or that they need to develop.¹⁵ First of all, a certain 'ethnographic sensibility' (Pader 2006) is needed. This sensibility involves an openness to new experiences and an

eagerness to find out about the worlds of others.¹⁶ Put another way, in the field, ethnographers need to adopt the attitude of students who want to learn (cf. Spradley 1980: 3-5), especially when talking to others. In addition, since what happens in the field is not planned, the activity of research can meander as much as the process it tries to follow. That is why fieldwork requires flexibility, in the sense of an ability to deal with surprises, especially in the act of observing. This has also been aptly referred to as an ‘improvisational quality’ (Yanow 2006: 70; see also Shore 2007: 200).

Furthermore, it needs to be noted that Interpersonal skills and reflexive skills support the general idea behind ethnographic fieldwork in an interpretive mode. Interpersonal skills are especially important for fieldwork access and relationships. In their field notes, ethnographers need to reflect on their position and interaction with others in the field and the way these might influence the fieldwork process and data that result from it. Although some promise that you ‘[g]radually become part of the furniture’ (Rhodes 2002: 414), fieldworkers should not aim at being flies on the wall (Emerson, et al. 1995: 3). It is not possible to be a totally neutral, independent researcher. Rather, the experiences ethnographers have during the fieldwork – including their feelings of joy, anger, boredom and so on – are sources of data. Ethnographers not only pick up on many of the images, noises, smells and tastes of the worlds they encounter, they do so simultaneously with the people in the field.¹⁷ They literally *live* through some of what the natives in the field experience – although possibly in another way, since they are not part of the field in the way that the people they study are.¹⁸ And finally, fieldworkers need to try to become aware of the way in which what happens in the field changes the ideas and identities they brought to the field, and vice versa.

These five activities and skills need to be seen as parts of a bigger package: the effort to gain insight into the experiences that people have who are part of a certain world.¹⁹ Certainly, the separate activities and skills are not unique to ethnographic fieldwork, but the package *is* (compare Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006b: 120). The five activities and the skills support each other. *Table 1* (below) shows the package. In the first column the activities that make up ethnographic fieldwork are listed. The second column indicates possible forms (for access and field notes) and the possible sources of data (for the methods). These possible forms and sources often need to be combined, e.g., having conversations on a regular basis and doing a limited number of formal interviews with some key actors. In the third column, the skills central to particular activities are listed.

Table 1: Elements of ethnographic fieldwork²⁰

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Possible forms/sources</i>	<i>Central skill/quality</i>
Gaining/maintaining access	Letters, e-mail, telephone, visits, introductory talks, chats	Interpersonal skills
Observing-participating-shadowing	People (see talking, below), spaces, meetings, rallies, presentations, celebrations, debates	Flexibility
Talking (conversing-interviewing)	Citizens/residents, civil servants/policy makers/planners, aldermen, mayors, politicians, members of civil society, professionals, shopkeepers	Sensibility
Gathering	Policy documents, diaries, political programs, newspapers, leaflets, annual reports, historical records, speeches, minutes of meeting, posters, letters, pictures	Not one in particular
Making field notes	Descriptions of actors, settings, events and practices, theoretical ideas/inferences, methodological remarks	Reflexivity

To summarize this section, interpretive ethnographers immerse themselves in the field over a long period of time in order to experience and understand the way people in the field view their own social-political realities as reflected in the ways they look, act, talk and write,²¹ not having the illusion that this view itself could be understood without the mediation of ethnographers themselves. This endeavor asks of ethnographers a fair amount of sensibility, flexibility, interpersonal skills and reflexivity.

The Usefulness of Ethnographic Fieldwork in the Study of Local Governance

Over the last one-and-a-half decades, a shift from ‘government to governance’ has taken place (Rhodes 1996; on local governance, see John 2001: 2-24; Denters and Rose 2005). In the traditional government era, government was put in the center of societal developments and was expected to deal effectively with societal problems. In the governance era, things are different (Fenger and Bekkers 2007). Firstly, government is no longer seen as one actor but as a conglomerate of actors. Secondly, government is not taken to be the only actor trying to influence societal developments. Thirdly, government interventions take place in a policy network in which power, resource dependence and strategic behavior are important. In public administration and public policy, governance refers to ‘governing with and through networks at the boundary of state and civil society’ (Bevir and Rhodes 2003: 9). Or, as Peter John (2001: 9) puts it, ‘governance is a flexible pattern of public decision-making based on loose networks of individuals’.

To be sure, the concept of governance points to both the changing practices of governing and a new vocabulary to describe them (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003).²² It cannot therefore be taken as a straightforward, given reality. This is why Rod Rhodes, Mark Bevir and others (e.g., Rhodes 2002; Bevir and Rhodes 2003; Rhodes 2007; Rhodes, et al. 2007) have advised the study of governance be conducted in an interpretive manner. According to Rhodes and his colleagues, the focus of the study of governance needs to be on sense-making, and this needs to be supported by ethnographic fieldwork.²³ This paper uses the same starting point. In order to see how ethnography can play a role in such research, however, we first have to know when people in the governance era would actually engage in sense-making and what the nature of this sense-making is.

People constantly engage in sense-making.²⁴ They always have and always will, even if in a governance era they might be doing it in a different way and with the help of a different vocabulary. When people try to deal with issues like housing shortages, riots in neighbourhoods, political crises and so on, politicians, administrators, bureaucrats, professionals and citizens give meaning to these situations. They give accounts of what is going on and try to come up with ways to solve problems. Whether this sense-making is done in private residences and closed offices or in newspapers and public meetings, these are social processes. Sense-making is not a totally private matter, even if other people are not present all of the time (Weick 1995: 38-43). It is also a political process because it is about defining what the problems are and what the solutions might be (Stone 2002[1988]), what *is* and what *ought to be* (Rein and Schön 1977). And, in addition, sense-making is ongoing (Weick 1995: 43-49). Using ethnographic fieldwork as a way of approaching these complex phenomena has at least four advantages.

Firstly, fieldwork allows researchers to get close to all sorts of settings of local governance, including those that are inaccessible to researchers who rarely or never visit the field, e.g., at meetings where aldermen decide on the future of their municipality or where residents strategically plan their protests. The most obvious difference from other methods and

methodological strategies (e.g., interview, document analysis, survey, case study without observation) is the ability to both look behind the scenes and to compare one's own experiences with those of others' experiences in the field. My fieldwork in municipalities, for instance, enabled me to attend weekly meetings of the municipal board and see how its members – aldermen, mayor and secretary – dealt with delicate issues.

The presence of fieldworkers in the settings they study enables them to have short conversations with people before, during the breaks from, or after, meetings, and to encounter artefacts such as leaflets or handwritten speeches in the field. Moreover, good (i.e. possessing the skills listed above) fieldworkers will often not be satisfied interviewing 'the usual suspects' or making surveys among a representative group. They will get behind closed doors, ask questions that were not on a list, follow the action taking place outside the town hall and, ultimately, will do their best to make a variety of stories heard in their writings (Yanow 2000).

Secondly, doing fieldwork allows fieldworkers to learn through their own experiences about political, bureaucratic and administrative actors, events, settings and practices. If a shift from government to governance has taken or is taking place, the best advice for students of politics and administration is *to go and see for yourself* (cf. Bayard de Volo and Schatz 2004: 270). In order to study local governance, ethnographers must '...leave the place where [they] live and work, where routines and people are familiar, and go to some other place where [they] intrude – more or less – upon the lives, the work, and the routines of less familiar people' (Fenno 1986: 4). The persuasive politician, the shrewd bureaucrat and the angry citizen may remain flat characters until you meet them. The importance of a decision that is made can become clear when one sees the tensions, ambiguities and political games that surround it.

In general, ethnographic fieldwork offers sensible fieldworkers the possibility of getting to know the actors, events, settings and practices of governance intimately, and later on of re-describing them from the inside. Moreover, ethnographic fieldwork can show the multiple ways in which actors in the field understand for themselves the changes labeled as governance (Bevir and Rhodes 2003: 77). Ethnographers can, for instance, find out that, and explain why, interactive policymaking means one thing in municipality A and something else in municipality B, one thing to citizen X and another to shopkeeper Y, one thing at T0 and another at T1, and so on.

Thirdly, drawing on their own and other people's experiences, ethnographers are in a perfect position to compare and contrast various types of knowledge. The knowledge that is encountered in the field is often referred to as 'local knowledge' (Geertz 2000[1983]; Yanow 2003). As all knowledge is local (like all politics), in the sense that knowledge is a particular, 'locatable' way of framing reality with the help of a particular set of ideas and concepts, in the field an ethnographer can look for various species of local knowledge. There is, for instance, the local knowledge that neighbourhood residents acquire about living in a certain area; there is the local knowledge that politicians acquire about making deals, and that bureaucrats acquire about trying to match unique cases with general rules. Fieldworkers can show how various 'interpretive communities' (Yanow 2000), in other words, groups that share certain

interpretations, give particular meanings to what goes on in towns and cities. In the local governance era, the knowledge and meanings that compete in the public sphere may have multiplied.

Before ethnographers enter the field, most of the time they have already acquired some of the local knowledge that might be referred to as ‘academic knowledge’ of the field. This knowledge – of which there is, of course, also a large variety of types (e.g., juridical, sociological, political) – is often abstract and the concepts are quite formal. Geertz (2000[1983]: 57-58) compared the concepts used in science with those used in the field, calling the first ‘experience-distant’ and the second ‘experience-near’. Although in an ideal world all these kinds of knowledge (the ones *in* the field and the ones *of* the field) might be well-connected, in the actual world most of the time they are not.

The iterative, ongoing task of connecting ways of knowing is perhaps not part of fieldwork as such, but certainly something that fieldwork could enable. When it comes to the three ways of generating data, the ethnographer can connect the various kinds of data – those from observing, those from talking and those from artefacts – and the different kinds of knowledge they contain. This act, the methodology called ‘triangulation’, gives ethnographers the chance to see the consistencies and inconsistencies of the field.²⁵ An example of an inconsistency might be found when, for instance, data from the backstage (Goffman 1959), generated through observation of closed meetings, are compared with data from the front stage, like official documents. The opportunity to compare and contrast these types of knowledge is what makes the work of interpretive ethnographers relevant to both policy science and policy practice, because it can enhance our understanding of the way local governance works, *and* it can inform political deliberation and decision-making.

The fourth advantage of ethnographic fieldwork is that it ‘encourages appreciation of social life as constituted by ongoing, fluid processes’ (Emerson, et al. 1995: 4).²⁶ How does this work? When people in municipalities are confronted with issues of some social and political relevance, they engage in processes that deal with two basic questions (Van Hulst 2008a: 38-39): ‘What is going on?’ and ‘What should we do?’ Flexible fieldworkers can witness the process through which people in the local governance era arrive at answers to these questions. They are able to get close to those who produce these meanings and to see how initial problem definitions are slowly, but steadily, turned into shared stories that leave few spaces for negotiation. Ethnographers can see how people in the field deal with the problems at hand when confronted with them. Ethnographers can see how meanings are produced, how reality is socially constructed – with its twists and turns – over time. More specifically, when one closely observes and talks to those who govern, whether managers, politicians, citizens or others, one can understand how they ‘play it by ear’, how they come up with problem definitions and solutions using the limited resources of time, knowledge, money, legitimacy, credibility, etc. that they have. And finally, beyond seeing how problems are turned into solutions, fieldworkers can make a difference if they illustrate the manner by which making sense of issues includes making sense of identities and of governing itself. This really makes a difference, because even studies of what is new about local governance that bring us closer to the human

characters involved, such as on the study of the Everyday Maker (Bang en Sørensen 1999), lack insight into the processes through which societal issues, identities and actual governing itself are interpreted.²⁷

Concluding Thoughts

Long ago the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski described the task of the ethnographer as follows: 'The Ethnographer has in the field [...] the duty before him of drawing up all the rules and regularities of tribal life; all that is permanent and fixed; of giving an anatomy of their culture, of depicting the constitution of their society' (1985[1922]: 11). This 'ethnographic encyclopaedism' (Ellen 1984: 69-70), with the ethnographer describing a whole culture, is not the model that students of sense-making in local governance need to follow. Not only is it unsuitable for fieldworkers interested in a particular aspect of social life, it also ignores the important possibility ethnography offers of bringing out the dynamics, tensions and ambiguities of local politics and administration. Ethnography is not only the method that can help us describe and understand all that is permanent and fixed; it can also help us to experience and understand the sense-making processes as they unfold. When we study sense-making in local governance, we might be better off following researchers like Victor Turner (1974: 37): 'Some of the "regular rhythmic events" can be measured and expressed in statistical form. But here we shall be first of all concerned with the shape, the diachronic profile of the social drama. I would like to stress as strongly as I can that I consider this processual approach decisive as a guide to the understanding of human social behavior'.²⁸

Ethnographic fieldwork does not perform miracles. But, as I have striven to make clear in this paper, fieldwork has its advantages for the study of sense-making in local governance: a rich variety of data; the opportunity to learn about politics, bureaucracy and administration; a great position from which to encounter, and later connect with, various ways of knowing; and the possibility of seeing sense-makers in action. These advantages all emerge from being in the field, where ethnographers have the chance to find out about the way people experience local governance and to generate experiences of their own. Ethnographic fieldwork is hard work. In addition, sensibility, flexibility, interpersonal skills and reflexivity are all needed to make it successful. In the end, however, ethnographic fieldwork can help us to understand and better explain the various kinds of experiences that form and sustain the practices of local governance.

Notes

- ¹ It should be clear that ethnography is not always interpretive. Also, it should be stated here that it is very important not to forget that 'methods' and 'methodology' are not totally separate domains. The work of Dvora Yanow (e.g., 2000; 2006a; 2006b; 2006c) shows the ways in which interpretive methods and methodology reinforce each other.
- ² The fieldwork involved the study of sense-making in two municipalities. In both municipalities the fieldwork lasted five months. It included the observation of many meetings, both public and private, over 90 open and semi-structured interviews and conversations with politicians, civil servants, members of public organizations in the municipalities and citizens, and the gathering of many documents.
- ³ Issues of fieldwork ethics and the writing up are not discussed in this paper.
- ⁴ The concept of 'observation' and 'participant observation' are too limited, because they might make one think that fieldwork is limited to observing. There is more to ethnographic fieldwork than that. Although the concepts of 'ethnographic fieldwork' and 'fieldwork' seem on first consideration to indicate somewhat different practices, this is not necessarily the case. As long as fieldwork includes elements like a certain attitude, sensibility, etc. (see the following section), it might be very similar to ethnographic fieldwork. The work of Schatzman and Strauss (1973) is a good example of such use of the concept of fieldwork.
- ⁵ Although Fenno himself called what he did 'observation', I would say that he used ethnographic methods.
- ⁶ Whether the present use of the concept of culture is a fruitful one is another debate (for Public Administration, see Van Hulst 2008, for Political Science, see Wedeen 2002), although the position one takes in that debate has consequences for the kind of fieldwork one thinks is relevant.
- ⁷ The 'being there' aspect of ethnography can also be seen as a quality that good ethnographic writing should display in order to convince the reader (Bate 1997: 1163-1164; Golden-Biddle and Locke 1993). The way I encountered the idea of 'being there' was through Geertz's book on writing styles in anthropology. The first chapter of his *Works and Lives* (Geertz 1988) is called 'Being There' and talks about the need the anthropologist has for his work to convince the reader of 'having been' in the place he writes about.
- ⁸ In order to generate data, it is advisable to stay in the field or visit it for a long period. Fieldworkers should allow themselves the time that is needed to familiarize themselves with the people and processes they are studying. Although it is not possible to know in advance how much time fieldworkers should spend in the field to get an idea of what is going on, one would rather think in terms of weeks or months than in terms of hours or days. Anthropologists might talk about the necessity of spending years in the field, but this is probably partly based on the ambition to study all aspects of a culture. Malinowski, for instance, wrote (1922/1985: 11): 'An ethnographer who sets out to study only religion, or only technology, or only social organisation cuts out an artificial field for inquiry, and he will be seriously handicapped in this work'. In anthropology a year has been the rule of the thumb because it would enable fieldworkers to witness people's annual calendar (Ellen 1984: 198-199). Clearly, the amount of time necessary depends on the situation one studies.

- ⁹ Malinowski (1985[1922]: 25) originally phrased this as trying to look for the 'native's point of view'.
- ¹⁰ After all, the best that interpretive research can come up with is 'interpretations of interpretations' (Geertz 1993[1973]: 15).
- ¹¹ The three ways of generating data form a well-known threesome (compare Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006c).
- ¹² My ideas on access were sharpened by attending a meeting on fieldwork relations organized by Dvora Yanow and Lorraine Nencel at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam.
- ¹³ One could also follow objects (Czarniawska 2007).
- ¹⁴ Emerson et al. (1995: 100-105) talk about three different sorts of analytical field notes.
- ¹⁵ Other academic skills and qualities, like analysis or writing skills, could be added here; but they do not necessarily make a difference when used in other research strategies. The skills and qualities listed here would also be welcome in many forms of case study research. Next to these skills, personal characteristics (e.g., social/cultural background, gender, age) might play an important role in the success of the fieldwork.
- ¹⁶ Pader (2006) gives a very insightful view of the way in which sensibility plays a role in ethnographic research. The description given here is my own description of ethnographic sensibility, not Pader's.
- ¹⁷ Physically, they might be located at a different point from the people in the field. Moreover, they might experience tiredness, excitement and so on at other moments than the actors in the field. And they might experience these things like some, but unlike others, in the field.
- ¹⁸ It should be noted, though, that fieldworkers can participate in the field and because of that can have quite similar experiences to those of people in the field. Moreover, not all people in the field will be able (to a similar degree) to engage in what is being studied. They may just be visiting the field, like fieldworkers. At the same time, fieldworkers may also be members of the setting they are studying. Adler and Adler (1987) have encouraged researchers to become members in order to gain more understanding of the life worlds of the people in a particular setting.
- ¹⁹ This paper focuses on fieldwork and not on desk work, although these are not totally separate sets of activities (Yanow 2000: 84-85). One could add desk work (analyzing and writing) to these activities.
- ²⁰ For another way of presenting the elements of interpretive research in policy analysis, see Yanow (2000: 39).
- ²¹ I could add 'smell', 'taste', and replace 'talk' by 'make noise'.
- ²² A normative side to the concept – as in good governance – could also be pointed to.
- ²³ Rhodes and Bevir combine this with historical analysis. The line of argument put forward by Rhodes and his colleagues will not be repeated here. Hajer and Wagenaar (2003) have also argued for an interpretive approach to governance, but they did not focus on choices among research strategies.
- ²⁴ Sense-making has been described in various ways. Weick offers a very insightful view of sense-making in his book on sense-making in organizations (Weick 1995).

- ²⁵ When inconsistencies are encountered, this might cause the researcher to look into them. They might, of course, be the result of bad research as much as they are the result of the way the field works. They might also be considered a normal part of reality (Law 2003). Moreover, consistencies might point to bad research as well. And, of course, it is more likely that inconsistencies will appear than that they will not, as the ways of generating data influence the resulting data in a particular way.
- ²⁶ It should be noted here that Rhodes and Bevir, in their earlier statement on the interpretive approach, paid little attention to this possibility of ethnographic fieldwork (see, Bevir and Rhodes 2003). Ethnography at this stage seemed to involve, most of all, doing elite interviews.
- ²⁷ The Everyday Maker was mostly described with the help of interview data. This did not mean that observation had not been part of the project, but sense-making in action was not part of the description.
- ²⁸ Surely, looking for more permanent and fixed parts of life in the field is important as well. But for looking at sense-making, ethnography gives us an advantage that other methods do not give to a similar extent. People can be observed, interviewed and conversed with, while sense is 'being made'. People in the field, then, do not have the luxury many interview situations offer of looking back at what was decided upon long before. In other words, if governing a town is experienced as a capricious sense-making effort while it is going on, looking at it in real-time might bring this to the light. And, as Czarniawska states: 'Modern organizing [...] takes place in a net of fragmented, multiple contexts, through multitudes of kaleidoscopic movements. Organizing happens in many places at once, and organizers move around quickly and frequently.' A good example of research that looked at processes this way is Noordegraaf (2000; 2007). He followed public managers while they were working, studying their 'meaning-making in action'.

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